

Report on Women's Work: Female Lighthouse Keepers of the Young Republic  
1820-1859

Including Charlotte Layton at Point Pinos  
A Master's Degree Thesis

By

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During the years 1820-1859 , 5% of the principal lighthouse keepers were women. Overwhelmingly, these were widows or other relatives of the deceased keeper. The women received equal pay to men in these roles but woman's lib was not a factor.

Several reasons explain the appointment of the women: It was convenient since the widows usually knew the job. The work had many components similar to the housewife duties, an acceptable role for women during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Without the appointment, the widow and her children would be destitute and caring for the poor was societal practice.

Charles Layton was born in England about 1814. He came to America and enlisted in the US army, being stationed in Philadelphia, Florida and North Carolina. There he met Charlotte Wade of Beaufort and married her in November, 1843. Charlotte was 19 years old at the time. A son was born in North Carolina in 1844. Charles reenlisted and was sent to California aboard the USS *Lexington* in 1846. The vessel stopped in Brazil and Chile and arrived in Monterey in 1847.

Charlotte followed Charles to California, traveling with their 3 year old son aboard the supply ship *Erie* , and rejoined her husband at the Presidio in Monterey. Their second son was born in 1849.

Charles was discharged as an Ordnance Sergeant and the young family settled in Monterey where they owned three small pieces of property. A third son was born in 1851 and a daughter was born in August 1855.

Charles was appointed the first keeper of the new Point Pinos Lighthouse in September, 1854 with an annual pay of \$700. This was soon raised to \$1000,

indicating the need to retain quality keepers. Isaac Hitchcock, an army friend of Charles, was appointed assistant keeper in January, 1855 with a pay of \$650.

Tragically, in November, 1855, Charles died of wounds suffered during a posse chase to capture an outlaw. At the age of 31, Charlotte was a widow with 4 children, the youngest only 3 months old. Without a steady income, Charlotte would be destitute. Therefore she was appointed as principal keeper with a salary of \$1000 in January, 1856. The pay was reduced to \$800 in November, 1858.

Isaac Hitchcock remained as assistant keeper with a pay of \$650, reduced later to \$500. In 1859 he resigned and Anson Smith\* was assigned the job with pay of \$500. The 1860 census indicates Smith living with Charlotte and her children at the lighthouse.

Charlotte married George Harris in 1860 and he became the principal keeper, following social convention. George was dismissed a year later, it seems for dereliction of duty since he preferred being a tavern keeper. The Harris family remained in Monterey for many years and also lived in San Francisco for several years. George died in 1890 and Charlotte died in 1896 at the age of 72.

“Charlotte Layton lived a remarkable life that included marrying a foreign-born artilleryman, transiting on a sailing ship around Cape Horn, being an early settler in frontier California, raising four children and outliving a second husband.”\*\*

\*Anson Smith, along with Jonathan Wright who served as Point Pinos lighthouse keeper in 1853, were the goat herders in Carmel Valley who saved the life of Robert Louis Stevenson in 1879. The topic of lighthouses may well have popular one between Smith and Wright and the convalescent Stevenson with his rich family background of lighthouse engineers in Scotland.

\*\*Quoted from the concluding paragraph of the treatise by Virginia Thomas.

Compiled by Frances Grate for Point Pinos docents and Pacific Grove Heritage Society preservation team.

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